

Sermon for Sunday, August 17, 2025—Being Like Jesus Compassionate

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This past week we held a Vacation Bible School program with the theme: Being Like Jesus. Every day we concentrated on a different idea:

- Generosity (Sharing)
- Including Everybody
- Compassion
- Forgiveness

We are utilizing the same theme for worship during the month of August and adding one more idea: justice simply because there are five Sundays in August this year. Today's focus: Being like Jesus means being compassionate.

The gospel reading for today is well known and commonly called "the story of the Good Samaritan."

Three points in today's sermon:

- What it meant to be a Samaritan in Jesus' day.
- What was the teaching Jesus was trying to accomplish by naming the Samaritan as the helper.
- How might this teaching make a difference in our personal lives, here and now. How can we "be like Jesus?"

What did it mean to be a Samaritan in Jesus' society? Samaritans were to be shunned. They were considered heretics and a practicing Jew was to avoid any contact with a Samaritan. Why was there so much animosity (if not downright hatred)? It starts with Israel splitting into two kingdoms after King Solomon's death. There is a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was captured and destroyed in about 722 BCE by the Babylonians. Many, but not all the Jews, living in the northern kingdom were dispersed throughout the Babylonian empire. At some point in the 5th century BCE the remaining Jews of the northern kingdom built a temple on Mt Gerizim so that they might have a place to worship YHWH. Based on the Samaritan Torah, they claimed their worship as the true religion of the ancient Israelites stretching back to prior to the Babylonian exile; a religion that had been preserved by those who remained behind.

When the Jews from the southern kingdom of Judah returned from their own exile in Babylon most returned to the region around Jerusalem. Their primary objective was to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem because they believed that the only correct place to worship YHWH was at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Much like today, differences of opinions about where and how to worship God and specifically what to believe about God are what divided Jews from Samaritans. The Jews of Jesus' day considered the Samaritans heretics. They wouldn't associate with them. They refused to walk or travel through the Samaritan part of the country and would extend their journey by many miles so as to avoid entering Samaria. What did it mean to be a Samaritan in Jesus' day? It meant that you were seen as the consummate outsider.

Next point: What was Jesus was doing by naming the Samaritan as the helper? The gospel reading opens with Jesus being questioned by a lawyer. This label meant that Jesus' questioner was an expert in Jewish law and history. When Jesus chose a Samaritan to be the hero of the parable he was shocking his audience and especially the man who was questioning him. The lawyer/questioner would have been appalled at the outcome of the parable. The two religious leaders in the parable, standing as examples for how good Jews should live, walk on past someone in dire need of help. The Samaritan, the heretic, the one that good Jews considered religiously bankrupt is the one who acted with compassion. Jewish law is quite clear that if it's a matter of life or death, your concern re' orthodoxy and religious purity are meaningless. Jesus chose the Samaritan to graphically demonstrate that one's ethnic background and religious practice do not automatically mean that they are cruel and heartless persons. In fact, just the opposite, the Samaritan demonstrated enormous compassion for the injured man. The religious experts in the parable are the ones who act with cruelty.

Point #3: How might this teaching make a difference in our personal lives, here and now.

Even though this parable was told by Jesus 2000 years ago it is deeply relevant in today's world. This parable still makes us (modern listeners) squirm because through it we recognize our failures: our failures to act with compassion toward people in need, our tendency to pass judgement on people that look, act, (and maybe even) believe differently than we do, and the speed with which we condemn; these are all points that come out of this parable and speak to us today. Because you see, Jesus is telling us

through this parable that right words and right beliefs are meaningless if we do not take right actions. Jesus is reminding us that we need to be compassionate.

Compassionate actions can be risky. The Samaritan took a risk when he stopped to help the injured man: sometimes those injured persons were decoys that provided opportunity for bandits to take advantage of unwary travelers.

Yes, compassionate actions can be risky. Let me give you an example. When I was quite young, maybe five, one of my mother's cousins started drinking too much. The extended family thought/hoped/prayed that a change of scenery would help Cousin George limit his alcohol consumption. Cousin George originally lived near New Richmond WI but with encouragement from the family he moved to our farm north of Ada MN. At that time my dad had a modest dairy herd and Cousin George agreed to help with the milking and farm chores.

As you are well aware, when you have a dairy herd you don't get to take a vacation unless you have the luxury of a really competent helper/assistant. My parents thought George's presence would allow them a few days away. So they packed me up and off we went to visit Dad's sister in Glendive MT—basically 500 miles from home. But when the cats away the mice do play as they say and we had hardly even arrived in MT when we got a phone call indicating that George had gotten drunk and totaled my dad's brand new pick-up. Our vacation was cut short and we hurriedly returned to the farm—because the cows needed to be cared for.

As I said I was pretty young. I don't remember if George was hurt or not. I don't remember if he left after the accident or stayed on for a while. But as I reflect back on the whole episode I think to myself that my parents agreed to having Cousin George come and stay out of a sense of family responsibility and a larger sense of compassion. Compassionate actions can be risky.

Yes, my friends compassionate actions can be risky. After all we will be receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion today and in this sacrament we remember the compassion Jesus showed to us and all of humanity. In this sacrament we remember his "body given for us" and "his blood shed for us." We remember his death on the cross. We remember that through his death and resurrection we receive the forgiveness of sins; Jesus performed the ultimate demonstration of compassion for all of humanity.

Friends, there are risks involved in being generous; risks involved when we include everyone; risks involved with being compassionate; risks involved with being forgiving. Jesus willingly took on all of those risks for us and for our salvation. If we consider ourselves followers of Jesus, then it seems that we are going to have to be ready to take some risks as well.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, We ask that you fill us with the knowledge of God's will so that we may lead lives worthy of the Lord and take actions that are fully pleasing to him. Strengthen us and give us the courage to endure with patience all the challenges that life places in our path. Guide us as we strive to follow where you lead. In your Son's name we pray, Amen.